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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000046

SIPDIS

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P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY
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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: NEW ADVOCATES FOR LEBANESE DETAINEES IN
SYRIA REFLECT POLITICAL SPLIT?

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires William Grant for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

1. (C) On January 5, 2009 a group of Lebanese (many of whom are former detainees in Syria) launched a new organization. "The Association of the Lebanese Political Detainees in Syria" was formed to resolve the issue of Lebanese detainees in Syrian prisons and garner support for those already released. The group intentionally launched the organization one day prior to French President Nicolas Sarkozy's trip to Lebanon and called on Sarkozy to pressure Syrian President Bashar Asad to release all political detainees. Observers viewed the creation of yet another organization to address the detainees issue as a sign of division among groups focused on this issue. Founding members confided to EmbOffs their frustration with the lack of progress achieved to date by the existing organizations. It appears that March 8 and March 14 Christians are politicizing the organizations who work in this area, with each side competing to take credit for any progress achieved. End summary and comment.

MARCH 14 MEMBERS
ATTEND LAUNCHING

2. (U) On January 5, 2009 a group of Lebanese (many of whom are former detainees in Syria) launched a new organization. "The Association of the Lebanese Political Detainees in Syria" was formed to resolve the issue of Lebanese detainees in Syrian prisons and garner support for those already released. The founders noted that prisoners released from Israeli jails receive compensation from the GOL. Prisoners released from Syrian prisons do not receive compensation. These individuals feel they are being treated as outcasts and have difficulty finding jobs.

3. (U) Several March 14 members attended the press conference announcing the launch, including SYG Fares Souaid, Kataeb member Michel Mecattaf, and former MP Camille Ziade. Human rights activists, journalists, and family members of Lebanese detainees also attended the event.

GROUP LOOKS TO CAPITALIZE
ON FRENCH LEVERAGE WITH SYRIA

¶4. (U) Founding member of the association and Embassy contact, Ali Abou Dehn described his ordeal as a prisoner detained in Syria. He emphasized the need to send a message to French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who was arriving in Beirut the following day, to pressure Syrian President Bashar Asad to release all Lebanese detainees from Syrian prisons.

¶5. (C) Additionally, Abou Dehn said that the association wanted the EU to refrain from signing the EU-Syrian partnership agreement. (Note: According to Kamal Batal, another founding member of the association, the French had delayed signing an Association Agreement with Syria until they saw "good behavior" from Syria. The French who hold the EU presidency, nonetheless were preparing to sign the agreement as a reward. End note.)

¶6. (U) Batal said that if efforts by Sarkozy fail, the group will ask the UN to form a committee with Chapter VII authority to investigate the status of the detainees. (Note: Ghazi Aad, head of Support of Lebanese in Detention and Exile (SOLIDE), has been pushing for such UN action for some time. End note.)

DIVISION AMONG GROUPS
REFLECTS A POLITICAL SPLIT?

¶7. (U) When asked by one of the attendees at the conference if the formation of a new association was indicative of a split from Aad's organization, which has been demanding the

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release of Lebanese detainees from Syrian prisons for nearly 20 years, Abou Dehn denied the split and said that up until now no progress has been made on this issue. Abou Dehn said he hoped this new association would be successful.

8 (C) However, in a private conversation with Polstaff on January 9, Batal was very critical of Aad, calling him "a doll in the hands of (Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel) Aoun", a leader of the March 8 opposition. Batal relayed that he had worked with Aad previously but then realized Aad was "doing nothing." Batal expressed confidence that his association would get a lot of work done, adding, "Things are moving fast."

COMMENT

¶9. (C) In the fall of 2008, Abou Dehn privately criticized to EmbOffs the efforts taken by Aad and other organizations to address the issue of detainees, disagreeing with their approaches and faulting them for accomplishing little. It is true that next to no progress has been made, despite the issue's inclusion in the agenda for President Michel Sleiman and Syrian President Bashar Asad's August 2008 meeting.

¶10. (C) It is equally conceivable that the organizations working on this issue are being politicized by March 14 and March 8 Christians. Aoun has vocally advocated for a solution, but was unsuccessful in making progress during his own December 2008 visit to Damascus. SOLIDE's Aad is known to support Aoun. It is possible this new association seeks to differentiate itself from Aoun and associate itself with March 14. If this new association is successful, March 14 members can claim credit. End comment.

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